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SUBJECT: CHOICE OF DEFENSE ATTACHE HIGHLIGHTS VIETNAMESE OFFICIALS'
SENSITIVITIES TOWARDS VIETNAMESE ABROAD

REF: HCMC 978

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CLASSIFIED BY: Kenneth J. Fairfax, Consul General, U.S.
Consulate General Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, Department of
State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The decision to appoint an American of Vietnamese origin as Defense Attache at the Embassy in Hanoi touched off a round of soul-searching at senior levels in the GVN and CPV by forcing leaders to explicitly declare why they did, or did not, object to the issuance of a visa for the Defense Attache. After an exhaustive review, only one entity, the Ministry of Defense's office of defense intelligence, attempted to block the issuance of the visa. Continued U.S. pressure played an important role in the eventual decision to issue the visa over the objections of that office. The process of reviewing the visa issuance included senior-level meetings at which officials expressed a general consensus that while younger Vietnamese-Americans (generally those born after 1965) are "culturally American" and generally do not harbor lingering resentments from the war, those born in the former Republic of (South) Vietnam during the 1950's and before are highly suspect since they are assumed to still harbor the political feelings that led them to depart Vietnam after the war. This suspicion of Vietnamese-Americans born in the 1950's and before can also be seen in the way other issues are decided -- including who can perform what songs in public. END SUMMARY.

12. (S/NF) CG used a wide-ranging December 9 conversation with an MFA official based in HCMC to gain insights into GVN and CPV attitudes towards Americans of Vietnamese origin and high-level attitudes that play into the continuing process of reconciliation between Vietnamese here in Vietnam and Americans of Vietnam origin. The official was present in Hanoi during key meetings at which the question of whether or not to approve a visa for the incoming U.S. DATT was discussed at length.

THE 1965 LINE IN THE RICE PADDY

13. (C) According to the official, the USG decision to propose an American of Vietnamese origin as Defense Attache (DATT) at the Embassy in Hanoi touched off a extended round of discussion within the GVN and CPV. Despite the officially policy of encouraging "overseas Vietnamese" to return to Vietnam either as visitors or residents, the official explained, many senior GVN and CPV leaders still harbor suspicions and resentment toward Vietnamese who left the country, particularly those who left around 1975 or as "boat people." The official, who attended a series of meetings in Hanoi at which the GVN response to the USG's DATT nominee was discussed, described the general

consensus as being that anyone born in the former Republic of Vietnam (aka "South Vietnam") in the 1950's and whose political opinions led him/her to flee the country has such a different set of political and cultural viewpoints that "they are difficult to relate to." It is not that everyone born in the 1950's or earlier is assumed to be anti-GVN or anti-CPV, he cautioned, it is just that enough people from that era do harbor lingering resentments that they need to be checked very carefully.

14. (C) In contrast, younger Americans who either left Vietnam when they were still children or were born in USA to Vietnamese immigrant parents are generally viewed by GVN and CPV leaders more as Americans who speak Vietnamese rather than strongly culturally Vietnamese. He said the dominant attitude is that "most of them [the younger Vietnamese-Americans] are just typical California kids or Texans." While the GVN has no formal, established criteria for evaluating Vietnamese-Americans, the official described the consensus as being that those who were born after about 1965 (those who most likely fled to the USA at age 10 or less or were born in the USA) are primarily American and thus not of particular concern as long as they are not the children of former senior South Vietnamese government or military officials and so long as their family is not known to have direct ties to anti-GVN groups such as the Viet Tan or FULRO. He said another exception is the boat people. Because they left Vietnam later, many of the ones born after 1965 were nonetheless old enough at the time of their departure to have formed deep, lasting negative attitudes toward the GVN.

15. (C) In the particular case of the DATT, all relevant ministries (MFA, MoD, MPS, MoJ) plus the CPV conducted their own reviews. With only one exception, the MoD, each entity eventually concluded that it had no objection to the American of Vietnamese origin that the USG proposed appointing as DATT. The objection from the MoD came specifically from the office of defense intelligence. Because that office is viewed as the

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primary counterpart for the DATT, its decision to block consensus would normally have decided the overall GVN position. Thanks to repeated and forceful USG presentations on this issue, however, the MFA argued forcefully that refusing to accept the proposed DATT would set U.S.-Vietnam relations back and harm the GVN's image. The Minister of Defense was personally persuaded by the MFA's arguments and announced that he was overriding the objections of his chief of defense intelligence by approving the DATT's appointment.

16. (C) That the GVN had been focused on the DATT's origins all through the approval process was underscored in the December 10 meeting in which MFA Protocol officially announced to EmbOffs that the DATT would be accepted by the GVN. Throughout the meeting the MFA Protocol Officer referred to the DATT only by his Vietnamese origin name rather than the American name he now uses. Moreover, the official diplomatic note refers to both the Vietnamese and American names.

17. (C) When asked what the decision to accept the DATT means for any future Americans of Vietnamese origin who may be assigned to serve in Mission Vietnam, the official replied that the most important factor is the rank of the individual. Junior and mid-level staff are unlikely to attract much attention. Should Vietnamese-Americans be appointed to other senior, high-profile positions, he said then the GVN response would most likely depend on the person's age, background and family history, as outlined above.

CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

18. (C) CG also discussed how these attitudes spill over into the cultural field, noting that a young "Vietnam Idol" competitor recently sang the same song that the HCMC Department of Culture and Information (AKA - the Department of Censorship) had recently ruled could not be sung by a famous Vietnamese-American singer who had returned for a charity concert (reftel). The

official explained that the question is not just what the words to the song are, but also their context. Because the Vietnamese-American singer is very famous -- both in California where she lives and here in Vietnam -- her performances are naturally subjected to greater scrutiny than those of relatively unknown young local singers. The facts that the Vietnamese-American singer's mother was extremely popular in pre-1975 Saigon and that her mother performed the particular song in question ("Saigon oi") before 1975 imbued the song with too much political symbolism for the censors to bear.

¶9. (C) After noting that there was probably nothing anyone could have done to gain approval for the Vietnamese-American singer to perform that particular song in HCMC or anywhere else in Vietnam, the official added his advice that whenever the Consulate is considering hosting any cultural event that may be considered "sensitive" for any reason (religion, history, politics, etc.), it will always be easier to start in Hanoi where the censors are generally more willing to allow foreign cultural events. Once an event (performance, exhibition, etc.) has been approved to take place in Hanoi, it will almost always be possible to gain approval in HCMC. Gaining approval in HCMC will generally require considerable extra paperwork and effort, and censors here may attempt to discourage the event by delaying action or requesting additional data, but if the Consulate is persistent enough then the HCMC censors are very unlikely to formally disagree with a decision already taken in Hanoi.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Whether securing a visa for an incoming DATT with Vietnamese roots or securing permission for a cultural event, perseverance appears to be the key to success in Vietnam, where "no" sometimes seems to be the standard opening position. It appears clear that the DATT's visa would not have been approved had not the Embassy as well as Department officials raised this issue so persistently. By pushing this issue so forcefully, the USG not only attained the immediate goal (a visa for the DATT) but also forced senior Vietnamese leaders to consider their attitudes toward persons of Vietnamese origin who left the country during or after the war. This is a battle we must be ready to fight again and again since attitudes are not changing rapidly, but it is nonetheless worth fighting.
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